

Exit Strategy

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It is the night before battle and although sleep is vital to my success, the anxiety slowly settles in the pit of my stomach. I wonder where I will be stationed, the front lines, the perimeter, or the water cooler? Each location poses its own threat. What is the best way to present myself to my unit's leader? Should I act confident or be submissive? Is it best to approach my enemies or to remain still until they discover me? And what if I am captured, do I possess the internal strength to stay calm or will I haphazardly spill out my entire life story as so many have done before me? I travel to the main location, hearing shrieks as I encroach upon the danger zone. The chaos soon becomes visible in the distance. The opposing forces are clearly distinguished by their colors and their chants; while the navy Kappa's rely on their voices, the purple Pi Phi's prefer body movement. As the veterans spot the young and inexperienced privates approaching, their eyes gleam with amusement and cruelty. Judgment day has arrived. This is not war, its rush. With my palms sweating and my heart pounding, I curse my conscription and recall my arrival.

My freshmen year I attended a prestigious university in the South. The beautiful campus, strong academics, and athletic teams convinced me the school was my perfect match. However, the university's picturesque exterior hid a troubling truth: the Greeks ruled. They controlled extracurricular activities, parties, and your social future. First semester the sororities were welcoming, always allowing freshmen into their events and offering helpful tips on how to survive your first year in college. But I soon realized that this was not reality, it was recruitment, an attempt by the houses to find the best girls for their new pledge class. I was still hesitant to rush, not knowing much about the different sororities. However my mother encouraged me to try

it, as Greek life was such an integral part of the university. I joined my peers a week before winter break ended to face the pandemonium of rush, but what I observed was both unsettling and self-revealing, the memory of my crusade still fresh in my mind.

As I prepare for my first rush party I quickly scan through all the guidelines in my head, praying I have not forgotten one of the sacred rules. It's day one, so as the pamphlet mailed to me in November states, I must wear dress jeans and a semi casual shirt. I struggle to close the clasp on my bracelet when I notice the tan line on my wrist, revealing the ghost of my watch. Watches are forbidden at a rush party for you might commit the mortal sin of glancing at it while a sister talks to you. It suggests you are waiting to make later plans, an inexcusable action, for where else could you possibly desire to be going?

After meeting with my rush leader I am given a slip of paper with the times that I am expected to be at each party. As I nervously examine my schedule, I realize Kappa Kappa Gamma, the wealthiest and most exclusive sorority, with a reputation for humiliating their pledges, is my first appointment. Already dreading the day's events, logic urges me not to subject myself to this demoralizing process, however the desperate need to be socially accepted convinces me there is no other choice. As I follow my rush group and fellow troops into battle, I am submersed in blue. Blue balloons on the ceiling, blue Kappa jerseys covering the walls, blue picture frames with photos of girls wearing blue Converse. The sisters belt out Kappa's chant, clapping in unison and temporarily disorienting me. I can no longer see the girl in front of me; as I struggle to escape from the chaos that is blue streamers, I feel someone link my arm. I have been captured by a Kappa officer and am led away for interrogation.

Away from ground zero, my vision returns and I can clearly see the Kappa in front of me. Her smile is big, bright, and transparent, revealing her hunger for fresh meat.

“Hi Katherine, I’m Meghan. How are you?”

“I’m good. How are you?” I curse my clichéd response.

“How was your winter break?”

“It was good,” I reply, “A little tough to come back early, especially since it’s my birthday tomorrow.” Shit. Now she thinks I don’t want to be here.

“Wow, happy birthday! Are you doing anything special?” Before I can answer, the sister’s arm catches my attention, a single navy string tied to her wrist. I am horrified as my memory flashes to the rumor I heard last month about the Kappas. Supposedly the upperclassmen tie a skin tight string to the younger girls and demand that by the end of the month it be looser, showing a progressive weight loss. Initially I dismissed the story as mere gossip, but in the present moment, it seems very real.

Suddenly a booming explosion. It is Kappa’s president on the microphone, inviting everyone to watch a skit demonstrating the different events sponsored by the sorority.

“As you come into the lounge, I invite you to take off your heels, get comfortable, and enjoy the show.” Now I am worried, this couldn’t actually be happening could it? Last week my floor mate confessed to me that Kappa secretly looked at your shoes to see what designer they were, for your financial status was crucial, indicating what you could really bring to the sorority. Every rumor and nightmare, which I once dismissed as intimidation factors, was becoming reality before my eyes. I remember sitting on the blue carpet nervously trying to think what brand my shoes were, if they even had a brand. I do not remember Kappa’s skit about philanthropy. After the act ends, we file out of the lounge with only our conversational blunders to ponder.

While these ambushes drain me of my energy, my mental toughness is truly tested in the free time I am allotted after parties. Lying on my bed, I am tormented by the compliment I did not pay or the joke that was never told, but mostly I am haunted by “Retention Rate.” A week ago this word meant nothing, and now it is the presiding factor over my future social career. Prior to rush week, the sorority houses rank the entire freshmen class, deciding which girls will strengthen the pledge class with looks, social connections, and economic resources. All seven houses however brutally battle for the coveted retention rate of one hundred percent, simply meaning every girl they invite to join the sorority accepts their offer. This unfortunately means that the sorority cuts you before you can reject them and lower their rate. I fight sleep, struggling to recount my performance at each battle station, yet the day’s chaos results in my surrender to exhaustion.

It is now Friday, the second morning of rush. I journey to my rush leader’s room to learn which houses I am invited back to. While marching, I know there is only one house I feel remotely drawn to and try to convince myself of our compatibility. While Pi Beta Phi has a wild reputation of binge drinking and promiscuity, I reason they are also mostly northerners, more relaxed, and less judgmental. Although I worry how their social habits will affect my studies, Pi Beta Phi seems like the lesser of two, or in this case, seven, evils. At moments, a logical thought flickers through my head, as if it is the last one remaining from my life before rush. If I can’t find a group that doesn’t require me to compromise my values, then why am I here? But there is no time for the nonsense of logic, my rush leader hands me a slip of paper listing my invites: Delta Zeta, Kappa Delta, Phi Mu. My jaw clenches. No Pi Beta Phi.

I retreat back to my dorm, but I cannot bear facing my comrades, letting them know I was rejected from my first and only choice. I walk to the edge of campus, the edge of the world as I

am concerned, sit on a stone wall, and sob. I cry because I feel unwanted and embarrassed. I cry because I sacrificed a week of vacation to come to school early and feel like shit. I cry because this is the worst birthday fathomable. And then it actually occurs to me that I am crying. I hadn't cried when my sister pulled my arm out of its socket. I hadn't cried when my soccer team lost the championship on penalty kicks. I hadn't cried at my aunt's funeral last year. But I was crying now and suddenly I felt disgusted. I no longer recognized myself. Who was this pathetic girl hiding from her peers, forgetting her past accomplishments, and questioning her self worth? The small hint of reason lingering in my mind came to life and urged me to finally consider an exit strategy.

The next morning I dropped out of rush and thus branded myself as a GDI or "god damn independent," as the Greeks dubbed those who did not join a sorority. Although I knew this would place a sharp division between the majority of the student body and myself, I needed to make the decision for my own mental health. Despite its social consequences, I knew surrounding myself with an organization which prided itself on being elitist, irresponsible, and judgmental would ultimately lead to my demise. Furthermore, I wondered how I could ever reach my full potential in an environment which embraced a way of life I had grown to despise. Although in my first months I pondered transferring due to my homesickness, I now seriously considered finding a school which would allow me to grow in an atmosphere which encouraged self development.

Transferring called for an immense sacrifice, I would lose the friends I had made, the 3.8 GPA I had earned, and worse the familiarity of a school which had taken eight months to achieve. Throughout the coming months I came to know stress. Not anxiety over a test or uncertainty before a big game, but the self consuming stress which only arises when you are

faced with a major life decision. Staying there was logical. I had a solid academic foundation, people I knew, and an excellent course schedule for the fall. Sure I was unhappy, but how vital is happiness to one's success? Perhaps success can be achieved without happiness, but unfortunately my mental and physical health could not, revealed by the ulcer I developed during my last month. I knew that in order to reach my full potential, both academically and socially, I needed to be at a school where I could benefit from all its resources and mature into an adult, not digress into an adolescent. My decision posed many obstacles both in credit transfer and housing, but mainly I feared the potential of regret. I did not want to go to a new school again, know nothing again, feel lost again. But for the first time it became clear that what I wanted was not always best. I had wanted to be in a sorority, but where would I be now had that desire been fulfilled? I would be in a sorority lounge, calculating our retention rate, crossing girls' names off the list. Names that had faces that I wouldn't care about, becoming the war lord who terrified me only a year earlier. Whether my decision to transfer was best remains to be seen, however I know when I look down at my wrist, there is no blue string. Instead there is a watch. Because I do have later plans; my future goals and aspirations, which can only be attained with solid self worth and respect.